

# **Story Valley**

## **Policy Framework and Toolkit**

### **(IO3)**

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## Introduction to Story Valley

Story Valley is an Erasmus+ project which uses different forms of creative storytelling to engage students attending Vocational Education and Training (VET) schools and colleges in literacy, language learning, oral history, and other cultures.

Introduction video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEv3-51G5Pw>



## Our aims

Story Valley aims to improve students' skills across five core outcome areas:

1. **Literacy** – students improve their literacy and language skills in the majority language(s) of their school/college and additional languages through storytelling.
2. **Oral history** – students have an opportunity to explore local history, migrant stories, and tales from around the world, as well as reflecting on their own personal history.
3. **Creativity** – students are inspired to expand their creative skillset both in general and in relation to their specific course of study.
4. **Integration and collaboration** – students work collaboratively with their peers and increase their understanding of the cultural backgrounds represented in the group.
5. **Engagement** – students find the Story Valley approach engaging and become more engaged with their education overall.

Additionally, the project aims to support teachers in relation to the following three outcome areas:

1. **Ability to achieve student outcomes** - teachers develop their confidence in delivering a programme which covers literacy, oral history, creativity, integration and collaboration, and expand their own knowledge across these areas.
2. **Helpful resources** – teachers have easy access to a set of useful resources which can be successfully integrated into their existing curriculum.
3. **Connection to Story Valley network** – teachers feel connected to and supported by an interdisciplinary network of teachers delivering the programme across the VET school or college, as well as a community of other colleges who have delivered Story Valley.

## Our partners

So far, Story Valley has taken place in four UNESCO Cities of Literature: Edinburgh, Leeuwarden, Ljubljana, and Nottingham. The following partners have collaborated on the project:

- **VET schools and colleges:** Edinburgh College, Friesland College, Ljubljana Graphic Technology Secondary School (SMGŠ Ljubljana)
- **UNESCO City of Literature organisations:** Ljubljana UNESCO City of Literature and Nottingham UNESCO City of Literature
- **Education organisations:** Learning Hub Friesland and the National Literacy Trust

- **Creative organisations:** New Noardic Wave
- **Local government:** City of Edinburgh Council

Other UNESCO Cities of Literature have also made contributions to Story Valley: at the 2022 UNESCO Cities of Literature network meeting in Melbourne, Story Valley partners were given a platform to present the project. Additionally, representatives from Edinburgh, Exeter, Krakow, Odessa, Québec, and Wrocław UNESCO Cities of Literature have provided valuable feedback on Story Valley in consultation workshops.

## What is the Policy Framework & Toolkit for?

This Policy Framework & Toolkit introduces Story Valley to the wider UNESCO Cities of Literature network and similar cultural education organisations. Some UNESCO City of Literature organisations already include VET as a standard part of their projects and strategies. However, other organisations may have previously targeted most of their programmes at primary and secondary schools or universities. For them, Story Valley could be a useful way of engaging proactively with local VET providers and students.

This document provides more detailed information about the [background](#) to Story Valley, with information about the benefits of a project promoting literacy and multilingualism in VET contexts. We provide [case studies](#) from our four partner cities, outlining the different approaches taken across the Story Valley network and setting out examples of best practice. You can also read the key findings from our [evaluation](#) of the project's progress across the core outcome areas. The final section contains [guidance](#) for organisations who are interested in adopting the Story Valley approach and more fully integrating VET institutions within their local literary network.

## Background and context

Literacy and multilingualism are essential skills within the modern workplace and wider society. However, too often, students leave education and enter employment lacking these foundational skills.

This section sets out the importance of these areas. Drawing on relevant studies and similar projects, it discusses the potential value of Story Valley in supporting the development of these skills.

## Literacy

A good level of literacy brings a wealth of benefits to individuals and wider society, including lifting people out of poverty, driving economic growth, and improving health and wellbeing ([Plan International 2017](#)). Despite this, a 2012 report by the [European Commission](#) found that one in five European 15-year-olds do not have the necessary literacy skills to succeed in modern society.

High quality literacy skills are vital for success in the workplace, with today's labour market requiring ever higher literacy levels. According to the National Literacy Trust, one third of businesses in the UK "are not satisfied with young people's literacy skills when they enter the workforce" ([National Literacy Trust 2013](#)). Consequently, some employers

have had to organise remedial training for young recruits to ensure their literacy and communication skills are at the expected standard.

Among possible solutions, promoting literacy through creative modes of storytelling has proven to be successful in projects aimed at various groups of students. For example, the [Critical Connections: Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project](#) (2012-present) gives primary and secondary school students opportunities to develop and share multilingual digital stories, supporting learners to face the challenges involved in reading and writing with greater confidence.

For students enrolled in VET courses who are preparing to gain employment, ensuring they have adequate literacy skills is vital. Story Valley gives VET students an opportunity to improve their literacy skills in a fun and engaging way in tandem with the skills they are developing as part of their regular course.

## Multilingualism

The advantages of multilingualism are similarly wide-reaching. Benefits include better access to personal and professional opportunities for individuals, a greater degree of cultural awareness and cohesion across society, and improved levels of competitiveness for businesses ([European Commission 2023](#)).

Story Valley encourages students to make use of their full linguistic repertoire. Through the project, students who speak more than one language are able to share stories in languages they may not usually get an opportunity to use within the classroom. This can bring clear benefits to multilingual students (pride in their linguistic abilities) and monolingual students (listening to and learning about other languages) alike.

Previous projects have shown the advantages of an approach of this nature. Assessment of a series of multilingual poetry workshops in primary schools organised by [Creative Multilingualism](#) (2016-2020) suggests the value of embracing and encouraging multilingualism. Children were given the opportunity to express themselves creatively through languages they would not typically have the opportunity to use in an educational setting. Evaluation of the project was overwhelmingly positive.

*“Even a discrete translingual writing workshop which opens up space for children to experiment creatively with language can have significant value, not least for multilingual and EAL learners.”*

*(Barbour and Lickorish Quinn 2020: 22)*

Story Valley might be particularly valuable in settings where the student population includes people from both local and migrant backgrounds, because it gives students an opportunity to tell stories from different cultures and in different languages. The importance of this was also recognised in consultation workshops with representatives from the wider UNESCO City of Literature network.

*“The community is seeing more and more cultural diversity, so it’s [about] trying to open up the students to actually listening to the stories of others.”*

*(Exeter UNESCO City of Literature)*

## Case Studies: What did we do?

To date, Story Valley has been piloted in four UNESCO Cities of Literature across Europe: Edinburgh, Leeuwarden, Ljubljana, and Nottingham.

In each city, VET partners were given autonomy as well as support in designing and running a Story Valley project that met the needs of their students and reflected the local area. This section presents a selection of case studies and highlights examples of best practice.

You can find additional information about these projects, and many more, on the [Best Practice](#) section of the Story Valley website, as well as videos showcasing some of the excellent work which has taken place so far.

### Edinburgh

At Edinburgh College, students enrolled on the Higher National Diploma (HND) in Music were asked to choose an object which had some resonance with their cultural background and bring it in to present to the class. They were introduced to the Scots-language phrase 'We're aw Jock Tamson's bairns' ('We're all the same'). Group discussion of their objects and interpretations of the Scots phrase led to greater understanding of different cultural backgrounds. Students were encouraged to use any languages they spoke when telling their stories – including Scots – and turned these ideas into song lyrics. In January 2023, students were given the opportunity to perform their songs at the Assembly Rooms in Edinburgh as part of the annual Burns & Beyond culture festival.

Professionals from the Scottish Storytelling Centre also delivered sessions relating to folklore as part of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival in 2022. Students explored stories and reworked these into a contemporary street drama, which was then performed in community venues including three community gardens.

### Leeuwarden

In Leeuwarden, students from Friesland College took part in a project called Connecting Stories – Connecting People in collaboration with [Rebelah](#). 14 students were given a tour of the Fries Museum and learnt about the museum's various collections and exhibitions. After exploring the museum, students chose an object that appealed to them and researched the story behind it more thoroughly. Students worked with local artists to convert these stories into a piece of art.

Connecting Stories Connecting People' video:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1PtHz4FFZQ>



## Ljubljana

Students at Ljubljana SMGŠ learnt about histories of migration from Bosnia to Slovenia following the Bosnian War (1992-1995). The students were supported by a local journalist who helped them to understand features of different styles of journalistic writing. Students ultimately produced a special edition of their school newspaper



dedicated to the migrant stories they had unearthed. The stories were told and written in Slovene and published alongside English translations, creating an impressive bilingual edition of the newspaper. Students were able to improve their literacy skills in both Slovene and English by taking part in the Story Valley project.

Journalist workshop video: <https://youtu.be/wB1ebxn5evM>



## Nottingham

In February 2023, Nottingham College launched a Story Valley trial across a range of subject areas, including Foundation Learning, ICT and Computing, Hairdressing, Creative Writing, and Journalism. Teachers used Story Valley resources to deliver sessions which drew on the creative skills students were developing as part of their course of study. For instance, Hairdressing students used Story Valley resources to create a mood board inspiring the design of their final hairpiece. Elsewhere, Story Valley resources available on the website, including [Scar Stories](#) and [My Hero's Journey](#), were used by pastoral tutors to develop students' confidence in sharing personal stories with their peers.

## International collaboration

The international network making up Story Valley has also given students from the different partner colleges opportunities to collaborate on creative projects. For example, over two days, students from Edinburgh College, Friesland College, and Ljubljana SMGŠ worked together to produce a website and write a song relating to the theme of [Carnival](#). A teacher from Edinburgh College summarised the benefits to students of collaborating internationally on a project like this in terms of students' personal and professional development:

*“To collaborate with colleagues in different countries replicates in many ways the experience that most of them will have when they finish their education, where they're working in teams that are completely global.” – Lecturer, Edinburgh College*

## Evaluation of project outcomes

After the first round of structured trials from September 2021 to February 2022, student

and teacher evaluations were conducted to identify what worked well and where there might be room for improvement. This section gives an overview of the evaluation's findings in relation to the key student and teacher outcome areas.

Student feedback was collected via an online questionnaire completed by a total of 61 students, made up of 41 students from Edinburgh College, seven from Friesland College, and 13 from Ljubljana SMGŠ. 18 teachers completed a separate teacher questionnaire, including five from Edinburgh College, five from Ljubljana SMGŠ, four from Friesland College, and in July 2023, four teachers from Nottingham College. More in-depth, qualitative feedback was also collected through a series of focus groups with both students and teachers.

## Student outcomes

Student feedback videos: [Students on Story Valley Academy](#) and [Mediadesigner students on Story Valley Academy](#)



### *Literacy and language skills*

A clear, positive outcome in relation to literacy is the extent to which students have been able to develop their storytelling skills through the project:

- 94% of teachers think Story Valley has enabled students to develop their storytelling skills.
- 80% of students think they have developed their storytelling skills.

Despite this, following the initial structured trials, around half of students and teachers felt literacy skills had improved. This could reflect the fact that creative modes of storytelling, such as songwriting or dramatic performance, may not be associated with a traditional interpretation of written literacy. It is also worth noting that a key component of Story Valley is teaching literacy in a fun and engaging way. Therefore, students may not necessarily realise they are developing their language skills through this approach.

- 55% of teachers strongly agree or agree that their students' literacy skills (in English/Dutch/Slovene) have improved.

- 49% of students strongly agree or agree that they feel more confident in their literacy skills (in English/Dutch/Slovene).

In addition, more detailed feedback reveals that Story Valley provided students with excellent opportunities to improve their language and literacy skills across different languages:

*“Students were speaking, listening and writing in front of others in a way I hadn’t experienced them doing before. There was an increased knowledge in the words we use for different objects across cultures. There was a growth in confidence when sharing stories with each other.” (Teacher, Edinburgh College)*

*“I feel that it is much easier for me to deliver what I actually have in mind. Writing is much easier and comes naturally. I think I also read a bit faster in English now.” (Student, Edinburgh College)*

### **Oral history**

Feedback relating to oral history shows that most students have learnt more about stories across a range of categories, covering the local area, migration, and different cultures. Differences in the number of students and teachers who agree they had learnt about each type of story could reflect differences in what students learnt about at each college. It is not anticipated that students necessarily learn about stories from every category, but instead focus on those which are most relevant to their setting.

- 83% of teachers think students have learnt about stories from the local area.

- 59% of students think they have learnt about stories from the local area.
- 78% of teachers think students have learnt about stories of migration.
- 74% of students think they have learnt about stories from different cultures.

*“Verbal storytelling was developed and students showed confidence and a willingness to engage in sharing stories about themselves.” (Teacher, Nottingham College)*

## **Integration and collaboration**

Story Valley also saw success in encouraging integration and collaboration between students. Students developed a greater understanding of different cultural backgrounds and felt their interpersonal relationships with their classmates had improved.

- 94% of teachers think students’ understanding of others’ histories and backgrounds has increased.
- 74% of students think that their relationships with their classmates have improved.

Additional feedback provided via surveys and focus groups highlights the extent to which students valued Story Valley as an opportunity to develop an understanding of and sense of connection to their classmates:

*“The students shared really personal stories that resonated with their peers. It showed that different backgrounds and upbringing don’t necessarily mean a difference in values. They are more alike than they are different and I think that is an important outcome that they took away from the project.” (Teacher, Ljubljana SMGS)*

*“Before the project, I’ve never really felt connected to Scotland at all, but since the majority of my class is Scottish, them sharing their stories helped me understand more. It definitely linked me to the group more; I felt like I belonged.” (Student, Edinburgh College)*

## **Engagement**

Furthermore, feedback demonstrates that students find Story Valley highly engaging. Participating in the project has also helped students feel engaged in their education more generally. This demonstrates the success of Story Valley as a fun and engaging approach to developing a wide range of skills.

- 89% of teachers strongly agree or agree that Story Valley has helped their students to feel more engaged in their course more generally.
- 84% of students strongly agree or agree that they feel engaged with the Story Valley activities.

*“Taking part in this helped me get back into the swing of studying since leaving school.” (Student, Edinburgh College)*

*“It has such a big impact on getting to know my learners and understanding their journeys and styles of learning that I would and will do it again next year.” (Teacher, Nottingham College)*

## Teacher outcomes

### *Ability to achieve student outcomes*

Evaluation of teacher confidence in delivering the student outcomes shows that, having taken the Story Valley approach, teachers feel confident in delivering sessions focusing on literacy, oral history, creativity, and integration.

- 93% of teachers asked felt the Story Valley approach was useful for teaching the different student outcomes.
- 94% of teachers felt more confident using storytelling in the classroom.
- 94% felt confident adopting teaching methods to stimulate their students' creativity.
- 78% agreed that their confidence to embed sharing stories from different cultures into their course has increased.

This is further supported by teacher feedback, which suggests that the Story Valley approach will continue to influence teaching methods in the future.

*“My confidence has grown as I feel ‘permitted’ to work outside of the accepted methods, and integration of stories in the teaching has definitely aided this.”  
(Teacher, Edinburgh College)*

*“I gained a lot of information in the way a journalist outlines and writes about a story in a way that is engaging and captivating for the user/reader. I think I will be able to apply these skills to the subjects I teach and find new approaches.” (Teacher, Ljubljana SMGS)*

### *Helpful resources*

The useful nature of the teaching resources is reflected by the extent to which teachers felt the approach could be integrated into their courses.

- 89% of teachers felt that the Story Valley approach was/could be easily integrated into the existing curriculum.
- 75% of teachers from Nottingham College agreed that the Story Valley resources were structured in a useful way.

Further reflections from teachers underline how valuable they found the Story Valley resource pack. Although some teachers used supplementary materials, they would nonetheless use the Story Valley resources again in the future.

*“I just think the materials were very useful. They were well organised, and I probably would use that again [...] I added some supplementary materials that I had that fit in with that devising process, but it was a good starting point and the students enjoyed it.” (Teacher, Edinburgh College)*

*“I found the resources incredibly creative and useful and will be using these again next academic year.” (Teacher, Nottingham College)*

## How to create your own Story Valley

This project has shown that cooperation between VET colleges and literacy and language organisations such as UNESCO Cities of Literature and the National Literacy Trust can be successful, rewarding and inspiring for all parties.

If you, working in a similar organisation, feel inspired to create your own local Story Valley project, this section provides some guidance on useful next steps.

### Step 1: Reach out to your local VET provider(s)

When planning your own Story Valley, consider which local VET providers may be willing to get involved in the project. Discussions with school or college leaders are likely to prove valuable in identifying groups of students or certain courses which might find the Story Valley approach particularly beneficial.

According to our college partners, these are some useful things to have in mind when approaching discussions:

- **Integration with existing curriculum:** consider which programmes of study would be the best fit for the project. Certain courses or modules may be good natural starting places, especially if they already involve a creative output (e.g., music, drama, creative writing, journalism). Consider how the project may link to things students are already working on, as teachers may find Story Valley a useful resource in guiding an existing project.
- **Time and resources:** establish how much time teachers could realistically dedicate to the project. Teachers found it more worthwhile to include Story Valley as part of their regular weekly classes rather than offering it as an extra-curricular option, so establish whether this approach would suit your local VET provider. Be aware of the likely impact on teachers' workloads, particularly at busy points in the academic year. Where possible, consider what funding you may be able to provide to VET schools and colleges to support them with this.

### Step 2: Meet with partners and establish project parameters

Having established the level of interest of local VET schools and colleges in Story Valley, consider whether other local partners (i.e., educational organisations, cultural organisations like libraries or museums, or individual authors or journalists) could offer their expertise to the project. Partners may facilitate an agreed number of Story Valley sessions. For instance, Edinburgh College students benefited from a series of workshops

delivered by the Scottish Storytelling Centre, and students at Ljubljana SMGŠ were supported by a local journalist when producing a special edition of their school newspaper.

In existing projects, students, teachers, and project partners have also benefited from working towards an event or exhibition to showcase their work. For example, students who completed songwriting activities at Edinburgh College had an opportunity to perform their songs at a collective concert with external project partners. An event of this kind can be a great way of connecting different organisations who have taken part in the project locally, motivating students to take pride in their work, and creating a sense of Story Valley permeating across the city.

Story Valley partners advised considering these factors when approaching project planning:

- **Share responsibilities:** establish the joint goal for the Story Valley project and be clear about who is responsible for key tasks.
- **Project duration:** Story Valley is designed to be flexible and adaptable to your individual setting. However, teachers who have delivered Story Valley suggest a maximum project duration of 10 weeks. Decide a timeframe which takes into account factors such as course deadlines and term dates, and be realistic about what you can expect to achieve in the given timeframe.
- **Go international:** in the structured trials, students and teachers valued the opportunity to work in transnational settings with students and teachers taking part in Story Valley in other countries. If possible, you may also wish to integrate short international exchanges (maximum 10 days) for students to learn from one another.

### Step 3: Get inspired

On the [Story Valley website](#), you will find lots of inspiration from existing Story Valley projects, including videos produced by students and exciting news about the latest projects. These may be useful when deciding what your own Story Valley project will look like.

Additionally, a working group made up of partners from Edinburgh College, Friesland College, Ljubljana SMGŠ, and the National Literacy Trust has produced a set of teaching resources to support the delivery of Story Valley sessions in VET settings. Other types of schools may also find these resources useful. The [Teacher Pack](#) can be accessed via the Story Valley website and is made up of four modules, each focusing on a different aspect of the Story Valley process.

1. Find the Story
2. Tell the Story
3. Get Creative
4. Share Your Work

It also includes examples of successful activities from our partner VET schools and colleges. For example, you can find details of a lecture given to students at Ljubljana



SMGŠ about the stories of refugees who came to Slovenia after the Bosnian War (1992-95) and an activity carried out at Friesland College where students reflected on their personal stories by drawing a visual representation of their roots.

Within this framework, colleges and teachers are given autonomy to tailor the delivery of Story Valley to their local area, reflecting on the cultural heritage of students, their personal stories, the stories of their peers, and those of the wider community.

## Step 4: Run the project

When it comes to the practicalities of running a Story Valley project, teachers who took part in the structured trials have provided feedback and tips for ensuring project success. You may find it useful to consider this advice when supporting the delivery of the project. Take a look at the [Teachers](#) section of the Story Valley website to assist with this step.

- **Community and team spirit:** it is important for students to feel safe and able to share their (personal) stories without fear of judgement. It might be useful to use icebreaker activities to help students come together as a group.
- **Online vs in person:** if possible, try to avoid online classes. Teachers taking part in Story Valley found that in-person sessions were a more effective way of generating team spirit and providing a space for creative engagement.
- **Engaging students in language:** encourage students to use their own language(s) and talk about their own culture(s) as much as possible.
- **Integrate workshops and lectures from different people:** draw on the expertise of potential project partners and local creatives. This could involve, for example, a book discussion with a local author.
- **Schedule regular meetings with partners:** these sessions do not have to be in person, but it is important to establish some form of regular contact between the various partner organisations.
- **Enjoy the process:** while it is beneficial for students to work towards a tangible goal of some form (e.g., a performance, showcase, or publication of their work), try not to fixate on the end product; the process is more important.

## Step 5: Reflect, evaluate and share

To reflect on the value of Story Valley and learn what aspects of the project went well and what could be improved in future iterations, it could be useful to evaluate the success of your Story Valley project. We have produced a [student survey](#) and a [teacher survey](#) which you may wish to use when measuring the success of your own Story Valley project. This will help to establish success in relation to your prioritised outcome areas.

Alternatively, you could organise feedback sessions or focus groups with students and teachers who have taken part in the project to get a sense of where they felt the project has succeeded and where there might be room for improvement.

## Next steps

- Go to the [Story Valley](#) website for lots of practical tips, teaching resources and inspiration.
- Share your stories and projects with us to be included on the Story Valley website.
- If you have any questions or would like to find out more, please [contact us](#).